

Recipients say TANF rules pose too many barriers to escape poverty

WASHINGTON - Nearly eight months pregnant and raising her 18-month-old son as a single mom, Dominique Pointer knows that getting a federally subsidized apartment early in August was a blessing.

Having lost her job with a medical billing company and homeless, Pointer, 23, along with her son, had been forced to spend nights in shelters and with friends and family members around her hometown of Gary, Ind. It was hardly the way to raise a family.

Pointer's only income is the \$229 she gets each month through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. Known as TANF, it replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program in 1997 in a massive reordering of the welfare system.

Pointer, though, is a survivor, taking advantage of meal programs and food pantries and getting support from agencies such as Sojourner Truth House, a day shelter for homeless women sponsored by the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ.

But she wishes TANF would be more supportive for her growing family.

"It's hard to maintain a family on \$229 a month," she said.

The program also requires that she start looking for work as soon as possible after her second child is born to maintain her eligibility.

Pointer expects that finding a job will be as difficult after she gives birth as it has been for months. Even if she lands a job - which is likely to be entry-level - Pointer

has no idea how she will pay for day care and transportation. The extra assistance she will receive from TANF for her newborn will hardly cover those costs.

Pointer's situation is typical of TANF recipients contacted by Catholic News Service. Recipients cited stringent rules, strict employment requirements, low monthly payments and rude caseworkers as problems that must be resolved as Congress prepares to reauthorize the program.

"The rules are strict and there's no flexibility and no exceptions to meet individual needs," said Cynthia Fulford as she stood in line at the St. Vincent de Paul Society's Ozanam Center in Cleveland. "They make it harder for you, the individual."

"(TANF) gets me through as far as paying my bills and putting food in my refrigerator," said another recipient who asked not to be named at Circles of Mercy, a community center in Rensselaer, N.Y, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy. "But it's not enough for other needs like diapers and cleaning supplies."

A recent study of the effectiveness of TANF by Network, the Catholic social justice lobby, uncovered numerous concerns among recipients. The study, Network's first looking at TANF since 2001, found:

- The program inadequately helps low-income families escape poverty.
- A high percentage of families struggle financially even when they move off the program's rolls and into work because of a lack of basic supports for transportation and child care.
- The requirement of recipients to find employment is problematic during recessions and periods of high unemployment and low wages.
- Recipients have limited access to education and quality job training, preventing

them from finding jobs that could lead them out of poverty.

- Recipients struggle to buy enough food for themselves and family members.

The report was released as Congress prepares to reauthorize the program for another five years. A vote could occur as early as September, although political observers and advocates for the poor expect Congress to pass a short-term extension to allow more time for analysis and a better economic climate. The expectation is that the reauthorization will be left for the 112th Congress to deal with after it convenes in January.

Sister Simone Campbell, a Sister of Social Service who is Network's executive director, told CNS that the program's way of measuring success by determining how many people remain on the rolls is a major shortcoming. If local TANF administrators can show fewer recipients, then the program is usually deemed successful, she explained.

"What has happened over these 13, 14 years (of the program's existence is) the rolls have been reduced and they've called that success," Sister Simone said. "The problem is that people have not moved out of poverty. Many people have moved into greater desperation."

She suggested a different measure of success, one that looks at the quality of life for families.

"We know kids do better when they've got food, medical care, basic things, when their family is not terrorized by not losing their housing, and when they have safe places to be while parents are at work. It's simple," she said.

The campaign for improvements to TANF is expected to move forward on at least two fronts. Sister Simone described one as educational, focusing on the public

perception of government assistance. The other, she said, will be an attempt to join forces with nontraditional partners in business to demonstrate how TANF helps their bottom line.

“A piece that we want to highlight going forward is how many people think of these programs as charity, as a handout,” Sister Simone said. “But the fact is most of these programs ... allow businesses to have low-wage workers. They’re business supports in my view.

“Business needs to pay living wages or we need to subsidize business with child care, transportation or housing,” she said.

At the Ozanam Center in Cleveland, Fulford offered her own suggestion to bring about needed changes in TANF.

“I think they (administrators) should come by here and stay at somebody’s house,” she said. “Spend the night over there and see how it is in somebody’s house. And go stand in line for hours in the cold. I’m telling you that’s not a good feeling.”